

Oscars Explained:
A Cultural Marxist Critique of the Academy Awards

by

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Abstract

This thesis deals with answering one important question regarding the Academy Awards ceremony: Why do unpopular, low-budget independent films win Oscars, rather than the popular blockbuster films with which most Americans are familiar? In answering this question, this thesis looks at establishing the images of both the Academy Awards ceremony and the cinema, in order to compare the two events. Specifically looking at the folkloristic practices of the two events, Chapter One deals with arguing that the Academy Awards ceremony is presented as an elite ceremony within the industry and the American culture, while Chapter Two argue that the cinema is presented as a place of inclusivity, where all can enjoy the delights of going to the theater. Using the images that were established in the first two chapters, Chapter Three proceeds to argue that in order to continue its reign as the dominant cultural critics of film in the United States, the Academy Awards ceremony must adapt itself to the impending popular culture ceremonies by differentiating it's nominees from those of other ceremonies, limiting itself to unpopular, small-budget films. This thesis also traces the fall of studio films at the Academy Awards, which made way for the rise of the indie films, and concludes by suggesting that there may still be a place for big budget blockbusters at the ceremony.

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Introduction

Every year, millions of viewers across the United States tune-in to watch their favorite actors make their way down a long red carpet to the Academy Awards, also known as the Oscars. They watch as directors, producers, editors, actors, and more are presented with awards for outstanding achievement in their respective fields. No film award ceremony can compare to the prestige of the Academy Awards, as it is the eldest and most formal film award show. The cachet of The Oscars is universally understood. The nominations and awards given to these works are also expected to influence the public when deciding to watch or purchase movies. DVD and Blu-ray casings highlight a film's honors by printing language like: "10 Academy Award Nominations, Including Best Actor" in a gold ribbon-like posting to attract shoppers' eyes (Scorsese 2002). Movie trailers will also often be re-edited after the Academy's nominations are announced to include mention of a film's achievements thus far. There is no denying that the Academy Awards has an enormous cultural significance in the film industry. However, the works that the academy has been nominating and awarding for the last 20-25 years are some of the most unpopular films at the box-office. It is almost as if the Academy is neglecting to choose films which Americans actually find appealing and entertaining, perhaps even indirectly suggesting that Americans are watching all the wrong films.

There are several questions that I intend to answer in this work. First and foremost, is the question alluded to above: Why does the academy nominate films with low box office returns over films with high box office returns? Surely, the answer cannot simply be that almost all popular films are poorly made. Secondly, I will also discuss how a film's financial budget (how much production companies and studios are willing to pay) directly effects which films the Academy chooses to nominate and award. A film's budget is a major factor in determining its

success at the box office; being that the more money a film is given to work with the more money it has for distribution and advertising, and to pay for better more experienced laborers. The two questions, I will show, have more to do with one another than one would initially assume.

The evidence I present begins with a discussion of the ceremony and the cinema, specifically the folklore present at each event. Using the folkloristic aspects of the two cultural scenes, it will be shown that the Academy's prestige is incompatible with the theater's casual image of inclusivity. The inconsistency breeds unrest among the Academy since it feels as though it cannot possibly award, let alone nominate, films which lack the image it attempts to portray. I argue below that the Academy has to resort to films that are not associated with the cinema; low-budget films that barely make it to wide release and that few people watch in theaters.

A cultural Marxist theoretical approach is used to structure the analytical portion of this thesis. Using cultural hegemony theory proposed by Antonio Gramsci, and later expanded by Raymond Williams, I chose to discuss the Academy Awards in relation to the power the ceremony holds over the cinema and the industry. Marxism, in its original and subsequent forms, concentrates on identifying and problematizing power and wealth disparities in societies. Whether their power comes in the form of financial success, the means of production, or, as argued later in this thesis, social power, there are always classes (or other social categories) competing in society. This thesis shows how a simple film award show is influenced by the other competing forces in the industry to narrow its possible choices for nomination to a select few films that have not yet been tainted by money or popularity.

I begin by discussing observational analyses of three previously aired Academy Awards ceremonies, with which I identify and describe the traditional folklore practices used to cement the Academy Awards as an elitist film ceremony. Once that is complete I move on to the arena where Americans receive their dose of popular films, the cinema. For that portion of the thesis, I conducted a micro-ethnographic analysis to identify traditional theater practices. Kevin Corbett, Associate Professor in the Department of Broadcasting and Cinematic Arts at Central Michigan University, started a conversation about what to expect at the cinema in 1999 when he conducted interviews with attendees; however, he fell short of documenting some of the more traditional aspects of the theater. By focusing specifically on the folklore of the cinema, I will provide a more complete and universal description of the cinema in the twenty-first century, one that shows the cinema's aim toward inclusivity, that the theater is a place for anyone and everyone. The purpose of separating the two cultural scenes is to demonstrate that the Academy's image just is not supported by the image of the cinema, the place where most Americans go to watch new films, and which the Academy is supposed to be representative. The Academy is meant to highlight the best theatrically released films of the year, meaning they are intended to represent the year's outstanding achievements in movies that have played in cinemas across the United States.

Chapter One: Establishing the Academy Awards deals with the Academy Awards ceremony. Beginning with the announcing of Oscar winners, the chapter takes the reader backward through the ceremony all the way to the red carpet where popular culture has started to grasp the industry's most prized ceremony. I start with the winners because it is where one finds the most uses of folklore that supports the Academy's image. Throughout my description of the ceremony, I stop to discuss the several traditional practices (like walking a red carpet and

ritualizing the walk across the stage) and pieces of material cultural (like a golden award) that one encounters, whether attending the ceremony or watching it years later on replay. The primary argument of the chapter is that the academy uses folklore to perpetuate itself as an elite ceremony, not a pop culture event. The Academy wants to remind viewers and attendees that they are the gatekeepers for films to be considered great. The chapter is intended to highlight what one would experience when watching or attending the ceremony, to get a feel for the Oscars.

The second chapter, *Experiencing the Cinema*, concentrates on the folklore of the cinema. Being an avid moviegoer, over the last few years, I have noticed several practices at the cinema that should most definitely be defined as folkloric. These Practices include a one seat minimum rule, a cellphone rule, the wearing of casual garb, and creating oral viewer folklore. The practices have cemented themselves as traditional in the minds of moviegoers to such an extent that a breach in the exception could potentially cause unrest amongst attendees. Chapter Two focuses on identifying and analyzing these traditional practices to form an understanding of the cinematic experience. Unlike Chapter One, which took the reader backward from the end of the ceremony up to its beginning, Chapter Two moves chronologically through a single movie night in the winter of 2016 at the Digiplex Cinema Center of Camp Hill. The reason for the distinction in documentation in Chapter Two is because of the change in methodology. Being that the information was gathered ethnographically, Chapter Two reads more as a narrative than its counterpart, Chapter One.

The final chapter, *Hegemony's Nomination*, focuses on the analytical portion of the argument. While the first two chapters establish and discuss the differences between the images of the Academy Awards ceremony and that of the cinema, Chapter Three takes the information

from the previous two chapters to argue that the Academy Awards limits its nominations to low budget films that have garnered little to no popular acclaim. In doing so, the chapter discusses the difference between big budget and low budget films, the Academy Awards versus popular culture award shows like the MTV Movie Awards, and how the Academy chooses to deal with hegemonic forces trying to dominate its cultural territory. Chapter Three has the important job of taking the documentation that was presented in Chapter One and Chapter Two to explain why popular films have trouble winning Oscars, how small budgets can help a film garner the attention of the Academy, and why indie films have become so successful.

The methodology used to establish the images of the Oscars and the cinema in the first two chapters can contribute to conversations in the folklore community as ways to compare cultural scenes that are meant to be representative of one another. The content can add to academic circles focused on the film industry, as well as, larger academic conversations in American and Cultural Studies about hegemony in the United States. In regards to the first conversation, the film industry, this thesis adds to the already lengthy discussion of the types of films that are nominated by the Academy. However, it strays from the standard narrative of blaming the long and well-fought production company campaign races and aims at looking at the nominations as a power struggle between competing images in the same industry. This thesis is suggesting that there is criteria for being nominated that can be identified before producers even have films to campaign. In Chapter Three, I discuss the hegemonic cultural forces the Academy has to deal with to stay relevant in American popular culture. In doing so, I intend for Chapter Three to contribute to conversations about cultural hegemony by demonstrating the reactions of a dominant cultural event like the Academy Awards to other emergent ceremonies that are trying to establish themselves as dominant.

The scholarly discussion surrounding the Academy Awards can be split into four main categories: encyclopedic commentators, fashion insiders, historical chroniclers, and political documenters. The vast majority of writings fall into the first type, which provides encyclopedic information about the ceremony; what the ceremony is, when it started, and usually a long list of each year's winners. The second category features those who have dedicated themselves to writing about the fashion at the Oscars. Being Hollywood's most prestigious ceremony, there is no surprise the fashion industry has used the red carpet walk-up to parade their designs on some of the most well-recognized persons in the world. The third category, broadly discusses the Academy Awards in historical reference to the ceremony, documenting its history and chronicling its rise in prestige. I do not believe this thesis should be compared to writings on the Academy's history as it has more to do with current nominations, and much less to do with its history. Rather, there have been some scholars that have studied and documented not just the Academy's history, but also the politics behind the awards.

Emmanuel Levy's *All About Oscar: The History and Politics of the Academy Awards* (2003) provides readers with a sociological view of the ceremony. Published in 2003 as a continuation of his previous works *And the Winner Is. . .* and *Oscar Fever*, Emanuel Levy, former film critic for Variety, challenges readers to ask questions regarding Oscar winners and nominees. He writes about the politics behind the movies and actors being nominated and winning the golden statuette. For example, Levy notes that most of the awards for Best Actress go to women in their 20s, while most awards for Best Actor go to men in their 40s, and argues that this supports the idea that women are rewarded for being young and beautiful while men are rewarded for being powerful. One might posit that this stereotype reflects an unconscious neo-Darwinian attitude towards reproductive and social status capacity. He also claims that the bulk

of Oscars will go to films that feature meaty characters because, although most categories are voted on by members of their respective categories (that is, actors nominate actors, directors nominate directors, and so on) final voting is open to all members of the Academy, the majority of which are actors who favor strong characters. Lastly and most importantly for my purposes here, I would like to comment on Levy's lack of inquiry into a trend that has become expected today of Oscars going to low-budget films usually produced by independent production companies, rather than big budget studio-produced films. He does bring up the contrast between the two categories of film; however, he misses the larger point. As one reviewer for the book put it: "Here is the paradox that Levy understates: Hollywood generally now honors films that it won't make" (O'Brien, 2003).

In *The Big Show: High Times and Dirty Dealings Backstage at the Academy Awards* (2005), Steve Pond focuses on the politics at the ceremony, and what it meant to the winners and nominees. In his chronicling of Hollywood's biggest show, he provides readers with some early history and bad dealings at the Oscars, like Greta Garbo's loss at the Academy Awards in 1930 that was the result of MGM mandating that employees vote for studio chief Irving Thalberg's wife, Norma Shearer. The rest of the book is dedicated to roughly a decade-and-a-half of Oscars history. What Pond provides is an interesting, and many times shocking, look behind the curtain (sometimes literally) at the machinations driving some of the more recent shows - an oversized gossip column about the drama behind the veil.

My work deals more with the politics that are discussed by Levy than those written about by Pond. It deals with minimal historical content and does not try and establish the Academy's significance to the industry. What I set out to do in this thesis is to pick up where Levy dropped

off; to answer that overarching question that has plagued members, critics, and film buffs for over two decades now: why are low-budget indie films always taking home the golden statuette?

Chapter 1: Establishing the Academy Awards

Traditional practices, behaviors, and materials can tell a lot about a group or event. Identifying the folklore of a group can help answer questions about what a group represents, including the type of image it wants to present to outsiders. Regarding the Academy Awards, that image is rooted in the elitist traditions that have become a large part of the ceremony. In the following pages I will discuss some of the traditions that help cement the Oscars as the most prestigious awards show in the industry.

To begin, one must first settle the question as to whether or not folklorists would go as far as to describe elite film ceremonies and the local cinema as constituting a folk group that could be studied. Culture is often categorized into a hierarchal structure separated into three distinct classifications: elite culture, popular culture, and folk culture. While there is an argument to be made that a particular event could be classified as more of one category than another, to exclude all other categories because an event has noticeable elements of a single category would be a great injustice in the study of American culture.

In Maria Leach's book on defining folklore, she identifies several inconsistencies between what can and cannot be considered a folk group. Leach notes John L. Mish defining folklore as "The entire body of ancient popular beliefs, customs and traditions, which have survived among the less educated elements of civilized society until today" (Leach 1949, 401). But, using such a narrow definition, Mish disqualifies the more educated enlightened "elements" of society from consideration for maintaining or even producing folklore of their own. Stith Thompson, on the other hand, writes that folklore "involves the dance, songs, tales, legends, and traditions, the beliefs and superstitions, and the proverbial sayings of peoples everywhere" (403). In Thompson's definition, a folk group is not limited to primitive or preliterate society. However,

nowhere in his definition does he include anything that could be considered material culture as folklore: his limitations lie with the inclusion of oral and performance culture.

In Thompson's and Mish's defense, it is quite difficult to define folklore in a way that could encompass all of which is folklore and exclude all that is not. In "Who Are the Folk," Alan Dundes battles with this issue and concludes that a folk group is "any group of people whatsoever that share at least one common factor" and that folklore refers to the transfer of artistic communication between those within the group (Dundes 1980, 6). Jay Mechling pushes the boundaries of folklore and folk group even further in his article "Banana Cannon" by arguing that a folk group does not have to be between two or more persons, but can be found in animal play between person and animal (in his case he and his dog) or even between two animals, like play fighting between dogs (Mechling 1989). Almost twenty years later, Mechling returned to the question of what could be considered a folk group in his article "Solo Folklore," where he presents the argument that folklore does not even have to be limited to groups. Mechling claims that folklore can be found between an individual and his/her subconscious, providing examples like a child's relationship with an imaginary friend or folkloric communication between "a human and an inanimate object, like a computer or a car or an appliance" (Mechling 2006, 444). It is evident from the wide array of definitions provided, from very specific to nearly all-encompassing, that the group of elite film actors, directors, producers, screenplay writers, etc., that attend the Academy Awards, and the attendants at the local cinema would indisputably be considered a folk group. The common factor the Academy attendants share is not just that they are invited to these ceremonies but that they are within the so-called "film industry." Each attendee has chosen to dedicate themselves to the industry as an occupation, not merely a hobby they pick up from time to time. On the other hand, the factor the cinema attendants had in

common could be as general as; they all attended the movies on a particular day to watch a specific film. Now that it has been established that the group attending the ceremony and the cinema could, in fact, be considered folk groups it is now necessary to analyze the events themselves to see whether or not they use folklore to further establish the identity of the group. In Dundes's terms, whether or not the group uses any artistic communication at the ceremonies.

I will start first by documenting the folkloristic aspects of the Academy Awards, and it seems almost impossible not to point first to the most exciting moment of the night for attendees: the winning of awards. As the anticipation grows in the audience, announcers remind viewers of the award being announced and the works that are nominated. Occasionally, depending on the award, short clips of the works are projected onto a screen for the audience to reminisce about the nominated. All this happens as the nominees sit comfortably within the crowd of observers in the sitting area opposite the stage. They sit amongst the other nominees, within the group they know so well through the film industry.

Then, as the audience cannot quite take it anymore, the preselected presenter slowly unsticks the seal of a closed envelope containing the name of the single award winner (an item of folklore itself that just could not squeeze its way into this thesis!). Finally, the winner is announced and is expected to walk up the steps of the stage and stand front and center for everyone present in the audience at that year's ceremony, and for millions of viewers across the United States to watch as the actor receives his/her award. It is no easy task either; once the winner makes it to the middle, they must give a gracious speech about how honored he or she is to have won an award of such significance, and how wonderful it feels just to be nominated amongst such great works. However, the accepting of an elite film award, at ceremonies like the Academy Awards, is not just some other publicity stunt for these film aficionados. It carries with

it the symbolic passage from one status to another; it becomes a rite of passage for those within the industry.

Arnold Van Gennep, one of the leading folklore theoreticians/scholars, looks for an explanation on rites of passage ceremonies. He wrote in his book *The Rites of Passage* that the ceremonies can be divided into three separate but interrelated stages (Gennep 1966). He identifies the first stage as the separation stage where participants are disconnected from their reference group. Regarding the Academy Awards, this occurs as the winner is separated from the audience, both physically, through the incorporation of a stage, but also audibly, the winner can try and talk to the audience but the only response the audience will provide is the light clapping of hands. No more is the actor within the group; while on stage, he/she is on his/her own. Next, according to his analysis, the participant enters a transition stage where they move from one group/status to another. For example, in the study of aging, this would be the moment in a coming of age ceremony when a participant moves from youth to adolescent, from adolescent to adult, from adult to elderly, or from elderly to deceased.

Victor Turner, who followed Van Gennep in the study of rites of passage, argues in *The Ritual Process*, that the transition stage is the most critical of the stages and is characterized by a “liminal space” (Turner 1995, 95). Liminality refers to the idea that participants are not just transitioning from one status or group to another, he/she is actually “betwixt and between” the two groups; no longer a child, but not yet an adult; no longer just an actor, but not yet an Oscar winner. Turner further argues that within the liminal space the participants have to overcome some challenge, dividing the space into pre and post threshold. The continued practice of incorporating acceptance speeches into the Academy Awards ceremony acts as the challenge winners have to overcome before they can enter their new status as “Academy Award Winner,”

and once they complete their challenge he/she can enter Van Gennep's final stage in the tripartite model to rites of passage ceremonies; the incorporation stage. This last stage is where participants integrate into their new group and where they can finally assume their new status.

For the Academy Awards, the exit from the stage assumes this function. Oscar winners do not return to the audience by descending the steps opposite those he/she just climbed to get up there. No, Oscar winners disappear from the eyes of attendees through a side exit of the hall where the event is held. Eventually the winners reunite with the original group of participants; however, they return part of an elite group of actors, known as Academy Award Winners. Winners now have a title that accompanies their profession, and participation in the ceremonies ritualizes the ascension to the new status. This also is not the first time a ceremony has been used to accommodate participants into a new status. Simon Bronner, in *Campus Traditions*, identifies the commencement ceremony as a ritual process that transfers adolescents into adults and students into graduates (Bronner 2012).

To backtrack just slightly, the second piece of folklore that will be analyzed appears just after a winner ascends the steps of the hall to receive his/her award. The award itself carries with it aspects of folklore that cannot go unmentioned, for this is the piece of material culture that aids in the artist's or performer's rite of passage. At the Academy Awards ceremony, winners are handed a statue of a golden man with his arms folded and his face blurred, officially titled the Academy Award of Merit, or vernacularly known as the Oscar. While the origins of the name Oscar are unclear, the Academy of Motion Picture writes: "a popular story has it that upon seeing the trophy for the first time, Academy librarian, and eventual executive director, Margaret Herrick remarked that it resembled her Uncle Oscar" (Oscar Statuette 2015). While this is a

fascinating folktale of the origins of the name, there is a greater folkloristic commonality that appears across almost all of the elite film ceremonies, that being the golden award.

The Oscar award presents a golden male figure featuring a blurred face standing atop a cylindrical pedestal. His upper-arms rest comfortably at his sides, while his forearms protrude at a ninety-degree angle, so he can grab a baton that stands just in front of him. The Oscar is not the only award that features a bright coat of eye-catching gold. The Golden Globes hands its winners a trophy that features a miniature globe wrapped in film tape (which has the effect of tying the award to the industry), held up by a rectangular column. The globe at the top of the award, as the title of the ceremony suggests, is unmistakably golden. On the other hand, the award that occasionally strays from the theme of a golden award is that which most closely resembling the Oscar, the Screen Actors Guild award.

Similar to the Oscar, a small statue of a man with a blurred face that stands atop a cylindrical mount characterizes the SAG award. But this award, rather than having the man stand with his arms folded, shows the man enthusiastically holding a play mask in each hand, one arm extended and the other at his chest. However, though the award does not always feature a golden man, it includes a golden plaque on the cylindrical column that tells viewers the category the award represents. Furthermore, the banners, commercials, and decorative stands, that all depict images of the official SAG award display the award as being entirely made of gold. The question then becomes whether the repeated use of the color gold when presenting awards at the Academy Awards carries with it the effect of artistically communicating something to its participants and audiences, or is it just an expected, repeated coincidence.



Image of the Academy Award of Merit, more commonly known as the Oscar.
Retrieved from [Oscars.org](https://www.oscars.org)



Image of the Screen Actors Guild Awards logo.
Retrieved from [sagawards.org](https://www.sagawards.org)



Image of the Golden Globe Award.
Retrieved from [Goldenglobes.com](https://www.goldenglobes.com)

Gold today, seems to the general public, as somewhat of an obvious indicator of social status within society. It seems almost nonsensical to describe the relationship, but nevertheless, within the pages of *An Encyclopedia of Archetypal Symbolism*, Beverly Moone writes “As a metal gold is quite literally incorruptible: it is highly resistant to chemical reaction and is immune to corrosion that affects other metals... Thus no speculative leap was required to make

gold the universally acknowledged symbol of life and the spirit and of perfection and immortality” (Moon 1991, 304). Of course, there are other symbolic ties one could make to the color gold. Based on the metal’s scarcity, one could easily relate both the metal and the color to rarity. Americans see gold (the metal and the color) everywhere these days: sitting on people’s fingers, hanging from their necks, painted on the back of their phones, even their laptops are gold, but no matter which way one spins the symbolism behind gold, in every scenario there persists an image of higher status that is associated with gold. The elite film ceremonies play off this symbolic gesture and uses gold as a way to separate the Academy Award winning actor from the rest of the industry. The repetitive use sends a message to the industry and the public that the winners of these ceremonies offer a high-class performance that is considered perfection, only to come around on rare occasions.

All that said, a golden award is only one of the ceremony’s use of color symbolism to present the winner as being different from other actors. Another example would be the ceremony’s traditional use of a red carpet to pave the way for attendees as they enter the building where the ceremony is being held. In this instance, it is both the object and its color that solidify the audiences' reception of the ceremony as elitist and hierarchal. Reception is important in this discussion of folklore. Even if not every member of the ceremony can identify the folkloristic function of a red carpet, there is a clear message that audiences are receiving through its continued usage, and again, it is a message of hierarchy and privilege.

At several different points, there is a connection between a red carpet and elitism. In the realm of folklore, Anne Rowbottom, an anthropologist, set out to study how a particular group of people interacted with the British Monarchy. She titled the folk group the “Real Royalists,” which she says are “people who regularly travel to the United Kingdom, to stand for hours, in all

weathers, to greet the Royal Family during royal visits. And, though living in different parts of the country, they have come to know each other through regular attendance at these events” (Rowbottom 1998, 77). Within her identification of the folk group, and description of the events, she notes a repetitive use of a red carpet to line the pavement before the arrival of the royal family. From there, the royal family proceeds to greet the attendees that stand firmly planted on the rough, uneven pavement to the sides of the carpet. The red carpet acts as a barrier between those who are royalty and those who it reigns over.

One can also look to popular culture sources for an explanation of the red carpet at film ceremonies. After a thorough search behind what the red carpet means at these ceremonies, it is clear that popular culture has too made the connection between the carpet and hierarchy. *Vanity Fair*, *Smithsonian Mag*, and *BBC Culture*, all reference a single play as the first documented use of a red carpet for greeting guests. They write “The earliest reference to walking a red carpet is in Aeschylus’s *Agamemnon* in 458 B.C., when the title character is greeted by his vengeful wife Clytemnestra, who invites him to walk a crimson path to his house. Even the King hesitates to walk on the crimson path laid before him, because he is a mortal, a man and not a god, and indeed he comes to a sorry end soon after setting foot on it” (Henderson 2013; Baker 2016; Miller 2014). While their recounting of the play may or may not be accurate, it is interesting to note, again, how popular culture has created its own folktales to explain the meaning behind the use of traditional practices at the Academy Awards.

Using both a folkloristic perspective and a popular culture point of reference, the identification of a relationship between the red carpet at the Academy Awards and superiority is unmistakable. It acts as a barrier to separate the attendees (all invited of course) as their own small group of elites within a crowded film industry. The ceremony’s repetitive use of the carpet

has created a traditional piece of material culture that helps viewers and audiences alike distinguish between those within the elite group and those without; a tool to make a distinction between America's royalty and those under their reign.

Before moving on to interpreting the folklore at the Academy Awards, it seems that popular culture and the elites within the film industry have conspired to create a cinematic year for the public to experience, a final form of folklore used by the Academy. The United States has a national calendar where it documents many religious and national holidays as markers for celebration, and the public uses the national calendar to understand what month and day of the year they are experiencing at any particular moment. However, Jack Santino in his book *New Old Fashioned Ways: Holidays and Popular Culture*, introduces the idea of a ritual year; a year that is experienced by the public through the use of holidays, material culture (specifically candy), and seasons (Santino 1996). For example, if Memorial Day had just passed, then the public makes the connection that the academic school year should be ending rather shortly. They need not look to the calendar to identify the exact day; they just know, through the holidays they have recently experienced, what it is that has just passed and what is to be expected in the future. Rowbottom also briefly introduces the idea of a ritual calendar with the use of royal events. "Some of these ceremonies, such as coronations and weddings, are infrequently performed. Others, Royal Maundy (Easter Time), Trooping the Colour [Sic] (June), the Service of the Order of the Garter (June), the State Opening Parliament (October/November), and the Festival of Remembrance (November), are annual events which frame the Royal Year" (Rowbottom 1998, 78). The continuation of the traditions year after year creates a ritual calendar for the group to follow: The Real Royalists use the traditional events to identify with the time of year.

In his chapter titled “Summersong” from *New Old Fashioned Ways*, Santino notes that the film industry chooses Memorial Day weekend as the first weekend on the institutional calendar to release films that will make them big profits (Santino 1996). However, this is not the only traditional date or season studios use to ritualize the year. One can take an individual film approach to ritualizing the year by the anticipation that builds up for the release of big blockbuster movies. In the modern era, large studios have been announcing film release dates earlier and earlier so that people can put the films in an order they can follow and experience. Therefore, as each film is released people can identify what is coming out next without the use of a calendar. Santino also identifies specific genres as occurring seasonally: action films in the summer, scary movies in the fall, Christmas movies around the holidays, and romance in the spring.

But, one can also take a seasonal approach to the identification of specific types of films. The seasonal approach is broken up into three seasons, the first of which is the summer blockbuster. Studios understand that because adolescents (elementary, high school, and college-aged) have more time during the summer months for activities, so they purposely schedule releases for big blockbusters during the summer vacation when they are likely to reach a larger audience. The second season coincides during the fall months between October and December, which mark the months when the limited release films will be shown in theaters. Studios specifically choose these months as a technical maneuver to raise their chances of winning awards later in the year. Evidence of this release season can be found by identifying release dates of the films that have won the award for best picture over the last decade at the Academy Awards. According to IMDB, one of the largest and most popular movie databases, nine of the ten films (2006-2016) that have won the award for Best Picture in the last ten years were

released in one of the three months of the season. The final season is what popular culture has dubbed Awards Season. It refers to the months of December, January, and February when the most prestigious of elite film award ceremonies are held to celebrate the “best” films of the year. Coincidentally, this is the time of year that the industry suffers the most financially at the box office; vernacularly known as dump months (Mellow 2012). Because the cinematic calendar year ends just after the institutional calendar year, the rhetoric that follows the final season usually falls somewhere along the lines of ‘this is what we’ve all been waiting for,’ implying that the public has waited all year to finally get to experience the last season. In this way, popular culture uses the cinematic calendar as a way to ultimately praise and glorify elite film ceremonies for the movies and performances they recognize each year.

To interpret the folklore at the Academy Awards, I will use the functionalist perspective. As an analytical tool, William Bascom introduces four functional interpretations for the application and the understanding of folklore in society (Bascom 1954). The first, escapism, based on the conceptual framework of Freudian thought, is intended to explain the entertainment aspects of folklore. The second, education, explains a group's intentions to pass on knowledge through informal means of communication. Bascom also delves deeper into the more abstract and seemingly interrelated functions of social control and validation of culture. The role of social control, he claims, helps to keep people in line, while cultural validation aims to reinforce to group members that even though their practices may be taboo, it is acceptable behavior within their culture/group. While it is true that Bascom neglected in his analysis the folklore groups use to try and create social unrest, he presents a strong argument for folklore that aims to provide a sense of social stability.

Because this chapter has analyzed the uses of folklore throughout its entirety, the main point here is to interpret said folklore. If one thinks back to the folklore that was discussed above, like the red carpet, the golden award, the walking of a stage, even the ritual year, it is clear that elite ceremonies (e.g. the Academy Awards) use the folklore to send a message to participants and audiences alike. It aims to differentiate between those that have won awards and those that have not, creating a hierarchal system within the industry that differentiates between actors and Oscar-winning artists. It also aims to glorify the players present at the ceremonies. It can, therefore, be said that the Academy Award ceremony continues the use of folklore as a way to validate the celebrity culture of which Americans have become so accustomed. An article by Amy Henderson titled “Media and the Rise of Celebrity Culture,” provides a precise account of the transformation of a culture idolizing politicians, businessmen, and professionals, to one obsessing over entertainment figures (Henderson 1992). She concludes that the shift occurred due to the changes that were “wrought by the communications revolution of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and by the rise of immigration and urbanization between 1890 and the 1920s” (49). Henderson’s findings add to the argument here as they support the idea that elite film ceremonies try to create folklore of its own in an attempt to maintain the celebrity idolization that has become popular in the United States through the use of media. Walking the stage, a golden award, a red carpet, and the general public’s creation of a ritual cinematic year, all work toward the same goal of validating the placement of celebrities at the top of the social ladder. The ceremonies ease tensions, like the unequal distribution of wealth, that otherwise may create social unrest, by using folklore to validate the separation between celebrities and commoners, and between winners and losers.

So far it has been shown that folklore, the way it is understood today, not only includes indigenous and illiterate peoples but is also present at elite film ceremonies. Furthermore, that the lines dictating what is elite, popular, and folk are often fluid, allowing for a text to fit into multiple arenas of culture. In the introductory chapter to their book, *Media Sense: The Folklore-Popular Culture Continuum*, Peter Narváez, and Martin Laba go about explaining the relationship between popular culture and folklore in modern society. Their primary argument is that the two areas of study, folklore and popular culture, are inseparable and that just because something is deemed as popular culture does not exclude the activity, practice, or event from being labeled as folklore (Narváez 1986). While the examples the authors provide are adequate, they nonetheless are dated in terms of the digital age. This chapter provided readers with a more up-to-date example of a combination of folklore and elite culture, but the following will follow in Narváez's and Laba's footsteps in identifying folklore within the arena of popular culture.

Chapter 2: Experiencing the Cinema

For decades, the cinema has been one of American's most cherished social outings, particularly for those looking for a fun, inexpensive way to entertain themselves for the evening. Studios spend billions of dollars a year on films hoping to lure audiences to the cinema with big-name actors, life-like visual effects, and new innovative storylines. However, as much as studios want to influence viewers, there exists a ritualistic formula for attending the cinema, which I documented by conducting a micro-ethnography where I was a participant observer at a 9:30 p.m. showing of *Doctor Strange* (2016) during one of my visits to the local Digiplex Cinema Center of Camp Hill on the night of October 27, 2016. The following chapter will take a look at some of the folklore that I experienced while at the cinema. Rather than documenting certain aspects one by one, I intend to present this chapter in ethnographic form, moving chronologically from the moment I stepped through the doors until the event was finally over. I would like to stress that although this research provides a snapshot into one particular group's folkloristic practices, the traditions and practices that are being argued are examples of folklore that I have experienced time and again when attending many different theaters, during different times of the year, and whether it be a kids movie or one that is rated R. I will then conclude this section, similar to the last, with an analysis of what is believed to be the reasoning for the inclusion of folklore at the cinema.

With our tickets in hand, we finally made our way to the corresponding theater. I decided when entering that the best row to sit in to get a full view of the theater and the participants would be the farthest row back. As in every cinema, the farthest row back also happens to be the highest row so that attendants can see over the heads of others seated in the rows just inches in front. The advantage in height gave me a relatively clear view of the actions of almost every

single attendant that evening. As we took our seats at the center of the rear row 20 minutes prior to the 9:30 p.m. show time (the deliberate maneuver allowed me to observe the actions of early attendants) the theater remained completely empty. As time began to slowly dwindle down to the most important hour of the evening, slowly but surely the cinema began to fill. The first few patrons to arrive started by occupying the several middle rows in the theater, plopping themselves, as we did, toward the center of the rows. What was interesting about these early arrivers' seat selection was that none of them chose to occupy a row that other participants had already selected, which brings me to my first encounter with folklore that evening. It was as if there was a barrier that prohibited early arrivers from impeding in the already personally selected section of the other early arrivers. I attribute this custom to Americans' expectation of personal space. It has been well documented that society in the United States expects and feels more comfortable engaging with others at over a foot of distance, while Europeans feel comfortable conversing at only a few inches of separation. This custom has led to the expansive idea in American culture that personal space also includes some form of privacy of the individual. For evidence, one needs not look further than the expansive privacy rights that the Supreme Court has manufactured from several Amendments in the Constitution. This expectation of privacy leads the early arrivers to occupy an empty row until a suitable number of rows have been occupied, which would allow for a breach of an already occupied row.

For those who would argue that early arrivers only want to occupy the best seats first consider this: once the magic number of rows was reached and participants began to file into already taken rows, not once did I encounter two separate parties sit closer than two seats from each other without the rows themselves reaching a suitable number to breach privacy. This brings me to believe that the American expectation of personal space is limited. Americans do

not always expect to have feet between them, or in this case, several seats between them, just ask any New York City subway rider. The expectation of personal space can be breached if, but only if, it is reasonable to cross that threshold. In the men's restroom, for example, there exists an informal expectation of privacy and personal space when using a urinal. If there are multiple urinals, it is expected that at least one urinal will be left to separate occupants up until every other urinal becomes occupied. Once every other urinal is occupied, then the expectation can be breached. The occupying of theater seats, though not as cut and dry as the informal rule for urinal use, functions in the same manner. There exists an expectation that participants will respect the privacy and personal space of those who have arrived before them. In the end, the theater was relatively full with some unrelated parties being forced to sit directly next to each other, while others maintained a one seat minimum separation. The separation was furthered by the use of technology.

As the theater filled with patrons coming to enjoy two hours of film, the room seemed to lack conversation. Cellphones drew the attendants' attention away from any possible discussion. As I peered over the shoulders of some of the attendants that sat nearby, I could make out several different social media apps that were in use; Instagram for those inclined to public photos of others, Twitter for those that were interested in reading status updates, and Snapchat for a personal photo of what others were doing that evening. The cellphone was a form of entertainment that kept attendants busy while they waited for the feature presentation to begin. Seated only inches from each other, attendants were more occupied with their digital conversations than they were with having real ones. This is not to say that the theater was completely silent. Several patrons were engaging in real life conversation. But, even the conversations that were had were presented through a multitasking of talking and digital

networking. In her book *Alone Together*. Sherry Turkle explains that when real conversations share the spotlight with digital ones, the user can never give his/her full attention to either one. Users do not have the same substantive conversations they would have had if their full attention were given to the real world. She also claims that society has grown to prefer the digital conversation because it allows users a delay in response time. Users are not forced to respond immediately the way they are in real life conversation; they can wait, think, and tailor their responses to try and control where the conversation will head next. In the little time that moviegoers have between finding a seat and the start of the film, attendants were more inclined to connect digitally for entertainment than they were to have a conversation with the people that were physically in attendance.

Finally, it was that magical hour of 9:30 p.m. But before the already dimmed lights were switched off to create complete darkness, what appeared to be an upcoming movie trailer began to play across the giant screen. The trailer opened with what a typical trailer would use to express the trailer's accepted rating; usually PG, PG-13, or R. However, instead of a rating, the trailer featured a blue screen with the writing: "The following preview has been approved for all audiences by the association of people who don't exist, Inc." Right from the beginning viewers were aware that the trailer was not what it appeared to be. As the first few seconds of the trailer play on screen, small M&M characters took on roles as spies; gathering intelligence, talking in secret code, and defusing bombs. The viewers were then led to believe that what looked like a trailer was actually a commercial that was being used by a corporation to sell more candy. Then, in the final seconds of the ad, a loud, invisible phone begins to ring incessantly causing the super spy M&M to break character and breach the fourth wall that separates actors from the audience. In an annoyed, irritated voice the M&M says directly to the audience "Really? This is the most

important scene and your cellphone rings? This is why we don't make movies.” The invisible phone was an imitation of what could happen if someone were to use his or her cellphone during the film. The clip ended with writing falling into a pile of actual M&Ms (not characters) that read, “Cell phones ruin movies. Please turn them off.” Finally, it is made clear that what played on screen is not a trailer nor a commercial, it is a public service announcement formalizing what has become expected when attending the movies. Cellphones are to be turned off or placed on silent throughout the duration of the film to keep from disturbing the other attendants.

Because folklore is concerned with informal practices, two important questions arise in the study of folklore at the cinema: Do any formal rules exist? And if so, do they work? The answer to the former is an obvious yes. Movie theaters have formalized the rules for phone use, making it clear that there is no place for technology while the film is in motion. For many scholars, the formalization of the no cellphone rule would disqualify it as being an example of folklore. However, though I agree that it invalidates the rule, I firmly believe that the reaction to the rule is still considered an example of folklore. The formalization of the rule only worked for about half of the attendants. The other half chose to keep their phones out until the final advertisement was played, and the lights were turned off. Once the film started not a single phone was in sight. I happen to be a frequent moviegoer and only on rare occasions have I ever seen the no phone rule broken, and even then it was for a minuscule period of time. The lapse of time between the enactment of the institutionally formalized rule and the unofficial understanding of when cellphones need to finally be put away is the second example of folklore at the cinema. Viewers know that there is leeway from the enactment of the rule to when phones must actually be put away, and although it is not written down or told to moviegoers, it is understood that phones should be put away once the lights go out.

Despite the lack of light and the spatial separation between parties, hypothetically, a conversation was still possible between participants in the theater. While the film played, I searched my surroundings for any signs of dialogue between viewers. Occasionally I would come across members doing, what I call, the Lean In. The Lean In is when one participant leans in slightly to whisper something to someone else in his or her party. One of several responses usually follows it; the speaker would either stand and leave the theater (perhaps to use the restroom or make a call); the recipient would hand the speaker the movie snacks; or both participants would simply continue watching the film in silence. The extremely short conversations during the movie were never loud enough for others to overhear, not because they were trying to be secretive (not once did any of the participants try to shield their mouths) but out of respect for others watching the movie. Although it was not conveyed to the audience via an M&Ms PSA, the audience simply knew that once the lights went out, participants were to engage with the film in silence. I would like to comment that not all films provoke the same reactions. The no talking during the film rule can be broken in some instances to interact with the content on screen. For example, on other occasions when I have gone to watch a scary movie at the cinema, viewers sometimes will shout something out in response to what is happening on screen; a “Don’t do that” or a “Don’t go in there” are common in those circumstances. However, these instances of speech in the theater are exactly what they described as, reactions to the film, not conversations with other attendants. There is an understanding in some circumstances that interacting with the film is acceptable, but that is as far as discussions should go while the film is in motion.

I would also like to comment on the wardrobe of attendants. As I looked around the theater, it was clear that there was only one unspoken rule concerning cinema attire: make it

casual. Attending the theater is an outing someone does in jeans and a T-shirt, not a three-piece suit. Occasionally, depending on the film, I have witnessed participants wearing costumes related to the film. The easiest examples to point towards are *Star Wars* movies. Fans of the sci-fi franchise will often attend the premier of the films with clothing, costumes, or hairstyles representative of their favorite characters. But that only occurs on rare occasions. For the majority of films, casual garb is understood as what should be worn to the movies.

Finally, our evening was coming to a close. The film had ended, credits were rolling, lights came on, and conversation erupted. During our departure of the theater into the lobby, all anyone seemed to want to discuss was the film: their thoughts about the plot, feelings about the actors, even the future of the franchise. By now it was 11:30 p.m. The audience began to collect in groups, respective to their parties, as they waited for some of their companions to use the restroom or get one last refill. Within these groups, I again began to see the emergence of technology as one or two members within almost every group pulled out their phones. While arguments were brewing by some members of the groups, others found it necessary to retreat into the digital world to conversations, which Turkle would argue, they felt they could control. Tech users were occupying a liminal space in that theater lobby. They were physically present at the theater, looking up every once in a while to engage the real conversation that was unfolding before them. But they were also transparent. They had seceded to technology their full attention and were now far beyond the theater lobby, deeply entranced by the digital world. Despite the tech users, conversation between present group members was meaningful and appealing. The film had ended over 5 minutes ago, and still all attendees did was discuss the movie's content. Departing the theater, standing in the lobby, and walking to the car all I overheard from other parties were their thoughts on the movie. Even within my own party, all my brothers did during

the drive home was discuss movie theories: if, how, and when producers would make a sequel. The conversation went on for days, which led me to believe that the movie experience does not end as one walks out the doors of the cinema, it continues for weeks to come.

In 2014, audiences across the nation were captivated with the big screen adaptation of Gillian Flynn's Best Selling novel *Gone Girl*. IMDB provides the following synopsis: "With his wife's disappearance having become the focus of an intense media circus, a man sees the spotlight turned on him when it's suspected that he may not be innocent" ("*Gone Girl*" 2014). Viewers were confronted with so many twists and turns during the film that audiences were left dazzled by the film's conclusion. Audiences took to social media to share their thoughts on the film, which led to a national conversation about misogyny in film. News outlets around the country, including *Time*, *The Washington Post*, and *The Guardian*, were engaging with the film weeks after its release (Dockerman 2014, Rosenberg 2014, Saner 2014). The question being asked by most outlets: was the film a depiction of misogyny or was it a display of misandry? Whatever the answer may be, films like *Gone Girl* make it clear that physically going to the movies is just part of the movie experience. The buildup conversations and the responses afterward also have to be accounted for, and included in the experience. And, if we are to consider the movie experience as continuing outside the theater, we must also take into account the folklore one uses after leaving, but still regarding the film, to also be considered folklore of the cinema.

As I scrolled through social media the morning following my outing, I came across several posts and memes about the film my brothers and I had just watched. The memes were intended to be all-inclusive, both viewers and non-viewers were able to understand the jokes. Conversely, later that day my brother sent me a link to a *New York Times* commentary on the

film that was posted on social media comparing the movie to some of the other superhero films that have dominated the box-office for the last couple of years (Dargis, 2016). The digital conversation that I experienced that morning was transforming itself into a critical conversation. Finally, the Wednesday following my movie outing, I attended my usual co-ed pickup soccer league at the Yellow Breeches Sporting Center. While I prepared myself to play, I overheard a conversation by two regular attendees about the same film I went to watch with my brothers. They too had also come across the *New York Times* commentary. The one gentleman argued, similar to the article that the film was a “flop” because it lacked any real innovation and had almost entirely copied the opening scene of Christopher Nolan’s *Batman Begins*. The other gentleman argued that simply because the film lacked innovation was not in itself enough to qualify the film as a “flop.” The two continued their discussion well into the evening, arguing the film’s success during water breaks and while sitting on the bench. This last interaction with the film’s material was clearly a discussion that should be limited to those who have already seen the film, and to make sure that happened they enacted a form of film folk speech. According to a *Wall Street Journal* article written by Ben Zimmer, the phrase “spoiler alert” can be traced back several decades when it first appeared in articles revealing major plot revelations about popular blockbusters (Zimmer 2014). It is no surprise that in today’s digital age, with DVRs, shows meant for binge watching, and movies becoming ever more complex, that “spoiler alert” has become the vernacular across multiple generations. When the term is used in articles, it is usually placed somewhere in the title to let readers know right from the start that the article reveals something important. When employed in a conversation, like it was that day on the field, it usually appears just before the reveal to allow listeners who have not seen the material a moment to step away. It can also appear as a reaction by non-viewers to unwarranted revelations; it is

used to remind any viewers revealing key points that they should be considerate of others and announce their spoiling intentions for the sake of not ruining the film.

As documented above, the movie outing itself tends to separate participants rather than unite them socially. Almost every part of the process involved isolating viewers from one another. The dimmed lights created circumstances that made it difficult for viewers to see and make eye contact with one another. The film's start marked an informal expectation that the audience should be silent to avoid disturbing the other attendants. Even the choice of seating involved boundaries that could not be crossed by mandating there be seats between some unrelated parties. On the other hand, once the film had ended, all participants wanted to do was connect in real time. They wanted to discuss their experience, their thoughts, and their theories with one another as they departed the theater. I went from encountering few real-time conversations at the start of the evening to finding few digital conversations. The film had completely reversed the interests of the viewers. I also realized that the movie experience was one that lasted longer than the two-hour film; it involved a buildup in some cases, and a reaction in others. In my case, it was the reaction. Days after having watched the film, the topic of the film and the folklore of the cinema continued presenting itself in conversations with people that had attended the event separately.

To interpret the folklore of the cinema, I would like to return to the Functionalist perspective, which William Bascom first introduced. Similar to folklore of the Academy Awards, It can be argued that the folklore of the cinema also attempts to promote social control. Much of the folklore found in the theater (e.g., putting phones on vibrate, remaining silent during the film, and announcing spoiler alerts) act as ways to keep attendants from disturbing others in and out of the cinema. Violating the folklore rules of the cinema could lead to social unrest,

creating arguments and enticing violence amongst attendees. There is also a validation of the American culture found in the folklore of the cinema. The seating arrangements in the theater acted as a way to perpetuate Americans' comfort with distance and privacy. Although breaking this folklore rule may not cause social unrest like the others, it can lead to the discomfort of other attendants, causing strange looks or maybe even prompting the other party to change seats. All that said the folklore of the cinema lacks the elitist connotations of the folklore of the Academy. The casual wear and costumes found at the cinema are folkloristic ways of reminding attendants that the cinema is a place for everyone, not just an elite group. And although it could be argued that the cinema's folklore creates two separate groups; those who have watch the film and those who have not, they are permeable groups in which anyone can pass from non-viewer to viewer simply by watching the film. A rite of passage ceremony is not necessary for attendants of the cinema. Who attends the cinema is not limited to invitees, it is a place that is open to anyone with roughly nine dollars and two hours to spare. As a whole, the folklore of the cinema makes it clear that the movie theater is an outing for the masses, focusing on broad, inclusive rules that everyone at the event must follow.

Chapter 3: Hegemony's Nomination

And the Oscar for Best Picture goes to . . . *La La Land*! Producers and cast members start to stand, tender embraces between co-workers are underway, a crowd of nearly thirty people covers the stage, and speeches begin to fumble out of the mouths of the captains in charge of making the film, only to be interrupted with: “No, there’s a mistake . . . *Moonlight*, you guys won Best Picture.” Those were the words spoken by Jordan Horowitz, one of the producers of this year’s almost Best Picture winner, as he took it upon himself to correct the mistake that was made by the Academy at the 89th Academy Awards ceremony (Luca 2017).

That is right, millions of people across the globe were watching as the Academy made their biggest mistake in the history of the Oscars. Not once since its start in 1929 had the wrong film team been handed an award that actually belonged to another film. For an entire week, people watched and read the mystery of the mistake was unraveled. First, it was revealed that the ceremony has two envelopes containing the names of the winners just in case one gets lost in transition, and that, unfortunately, announcers Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway read the second envelope for Best Actress, rather than one for Best Picture. Then there were stories about how the mistake could have been avoided, followed by finger pointing at who was to blame at PriceWaterhouseCoopers, the prestigious accountancy consultant contracted to run the ceremony (Guglielmi 2017). Ultimately, the Academy announced it would continue its work with the accounting firm responsible for tallying the voting and safeguarding winners’ names, but that it would no longer collaborate with the particular accountants at the company that were tasked with securing the envelopes during the ceremony (Buckley 2017). All that being said, the announcement mix-up still was not the biggest shocker at the 2017 Academy Awards; it was that *Moonlight* actually won Best Picture.

In the lead-up to each year's Academy Awards, there are certain award shows one can look to that can help predict which film will take home the golden statuette. *La La Land* was far and away the most decorated film leading into the 89th Academy Awards, winning best picture at both the Golden Globes and across the Atlantic at the British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) award ceremony, not to mention its record-tying 14 nominations going into the Oscars on February 26, 2017. Going back, one month after ABC Network's airing of the ceremony, I cannot find a single entertainment website that ranks *Moonlight* as the number one contender (Lowry 2017, Thompson 2017, Travers 2017). They all thought it would be *La La Land* that would take the stage (and keep it). So, what was it that pushed *Moonlight* over the edge in the minds of the Academy? One need not look further than the response Academy Award Nominated actor Ryan Gosling gave for his giggling on stage when it was revealed that his film, *La La Land*, had actually lost: "I was watching people start to have this panicked reaction in the crowd. I felt like someone had been hurt. I thought there was some kind of medical situation, and I had this worst-case scenario playing out in my head. I just heard 'oh, "*Moonlight*" won,' and I was so relieved that I started laughing. But truthfully, I was also so thrilled that 'Moonlight' won. It's such a groundbreaking film, and they made it for a million dollars. It's an incredible achievement" (Czachor 2017, France 2017). Gosling's inclusion of *Moonlight*'s budget was no mistake, nor should it be overlooked in any way. *Moonlight* had the smallest budget of any film nominated for Best Picture at the 2017 Academy Awards, and as it will be argued in the following pages perhaps was one of the fundamental reasons it won the award instead of its critically and popularly favored running mate, *La La Land*.

Before discussing what film nominations look like in the twenty-first century, it would be wise to first look to the past to understand the changes that have occurred over time. Emmanuel

Levy, who was discussed in the introduction, provides a beautiful history of the Academy's nomination past in his book *All About Oscar*. In the chapter titled "Can the Oscar Be Bought?" Levy begins his discussion at the start of the ceremonies in 1929. You see, The Academy Awards according to Levy:

Began its existence as a guild-busting company union, led by the strongest studio, MGM. Louis B. Mayer, who ruled MGM for two decades, was one of the Academy's charter founders, and was instrumental in drafting its goals and recruiting its members.

In the Oscars' first twelve years (from 1927-28 to 1939), of the 102 Best Picture nominees, 28 were produced by MGM, 17 by Paramount, 10 by Twentieth Century-Fox, 15 by Warner, 8 by Columbia, 7 by RKO, and 4 each by United Artists and Universal. Only three of the nominees were produced outside Hollywood, the British-made *The Private Life of Henry VIII* and *Pygmalion*, and the French *Grand Illusions*. (Levy 2005, 324)

It was a studio game, but only the big studios got a chance to play. Small studios, and their rising stars, quickly realized the difficulty of winning or even being nominated, for an Academy Award without the close connections required. Small studios were forced to cozy up to the big hitters, like MGM, to garner the attention of the few powerful cliques that dominated the Academy. In the 1940s MGM lost some of its power in the industry, opening up new avenues for smaller studios like Columbia, Universal, and Republic. In so doing, Columbia in the 1950s was able to conjure up three Best Picture winners: *From Here to Eternity* (1953), *On the Waterfront* (1954), and *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957) (Levy 2005). During the age of the studio

system, Academy members were more inclined to vote for the studio that held their contract or produced their films. Members only really had two options during the first few decades of awards, either vote for their home company or risk their career voting for the competition. It feels almost wrong to refer to it as an option. However, as the conflict between big and small studios began to get resolved, there was another battle rising just on the horizon. Over the last thirty years, the Oscars experienced a notable change in the types of films nominated. Smaller, independent companies (independent of studios) have made their unique mark on American cinema, and have today, all but taken over the Academy Awards.

There were several independent films in the 1940s and 50s that made their way to Best Picture nominations; some even winning the Oscar, like *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946) produced by Samuel Goldwyn Company, *Marty* (1955) produced by Hecht-Lancaster Productions, *Around the World in 80 Days* (1956) produced by Michael Todd Company, and *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957) produced by Columbia. But, indies really broke the glass ceiling in 1987 when all five Best Picture nominations went to films made out of the Hollywood establishment: *Platoon* (1986) produced by Hemdale, *A Room With a View* (1985) produced by Goldcrest Films International, *The Mission* (1986) produced by Warner Bros and Goldcrest Films International, *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986) produced by Orion Pictures, and *Children of a Lesser God* (1986) produced by Paramount (Levy 2005). In addition to winning the interests of the Academy, at that time, indies were also making money. Studios began to realize the potential profitability in making small budget films, like *Sex, Lies, and Videotape* produced by Outlaw Productions, which grossed 250% of its budget at the box-office in 1989. Mainstream Hollywood watched on as indies started taking home Oscars and nominations. In 1997, with the exception of *Jerry Maguire* (1996), all Best Picture nominations were indies: *The English*

Patient (1996), *Fargo* (1996), *Secrets & Lies* (1996), and *Shine* (1996). Even without the four out of five nominations in 1997, the 1990s are especially important to one indie company: Miramax.

Considered the gold standard of indie companies, Miramax was founded by Bob and Harvey Weinstein in 1979 to make films that would potentially be scrapped by the major studios. Its success ran throughout the 1990s when the company, operating as of 1993 as an independent subsidiary of The Walt Disney Company, was not only scoring big at the box-office but was also raking in Best Picture nominations. Its run started at the 1993 Academy Awards where its film *The Crying Game* (1992) was nominated for Best Picture, and for thirteen consecutive years, Miramax continued its reign by having at least one Best Picture nomination (the company scored two nominations at the Awards in 1999 for *Shakespeare in Love* and *Life is Beautiful*). Miramax and its founders eventually split ways in 2005 after distribution disputes, and has since been acquired by beIN Media Group. The company is today considered a mini-major production and distribution company, but its roots and its unprecedented record at the Academy Awards speak for themselves.

Emmanuel Levy argues that part of Miramax's success stems from its dedication to running long, hard-fought campaigns to highlight for the Academy its notable works each year during critical voting periods. Ad campaigns were not new tools being used, but rather reinvented ones. Since its start, the Academy Awards members have always been able to be swayed in their decision-making process. Phone calls asking members to vote a certain way, studios pressuring employees that were members, or even just positive whispers about a film that might be overlooked, were not unusual campaign tactics during the Oscars' first few decades. However, Miramax took campaigning to the next level, running ads, having stars appear on late-

night talk shows, hosting dinners, hosting screenings, hiring outside consultants. Eventually, other small production companies, like DreamWorks, followed suit in aggressive campaigning. Levy writes about DreamWorks's campaign for *American Beauty* as a money-siphoning strategy that cost the company approximately three-quarters of a million dollars just in post-nomination advertisements. The director Sam Mendez, screenwriter Alan Ball, and stars Kevin Spacey and Annette Bening, also apparently hosted a dinner for "guests" where soundtrack artist Elliot Smith performed. According to Levy, it was the campaign that drove *American Beauty* (1999) to win DreamWorks the Oscar for Best Picture, along with Best Director, Best Actor, Best Screenplay, and Best Cinematography. However, he does state that "a lesser campaign does not necessarily mean that the film will lose in its nominated categories" (Levy 2005, 338). He uses Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) to make his point. Demme's nail-biting thriller was released so far in advance of the ceremony (the prior February) that it was surprising the film got any Oscar-buzz at all, especially since Orion, its production company, spent very little on pre-Oscar campaigning. Nonetheless, the film went on to win the Big Five, the most recent of only three films to do so.

However, the standard ad campaign explanation for Oscar wins and nominations is dependent on assuming that Academy members care how many times they see a film's trailer or how many people from the general public go to watch a movie, which quite frankly is a reach. If there is anything one should take from the first two chapters of this thesis, it is that the Academy today cares very little for the box office. Popularity is not their game, they are looking for films that will maintain their elite image, and they will not be finding those films hiding within box-office hits. Rather, I would like to suggest that the opposite of the ad campaign explanation is more appropriate when nominating and granting films Oscars in the twenty-first century. It

appears that the less popular a film is, and by this, I mean barely making it to the box-office, not a box office dud, the better the film's chances are at winning the Oscar. The reason for the Academy's favoritism toward unpopular films is because the ceremony acts as the dominant cultural force within its industry. To fully understand this explanation, one should first understand Marxist criticism – that is, the post-Karl Marx critical theory variant which emerged with the Frankfurt School in the 1930s, and which provided the platform for a revamped Marxian approach that relied not just on class but other angles of critical analysis.

Marxist criticism grew out of the cultural theory first introduced by Karl Marx. He believed that class struggle was at the center of social change in society, that those who controlled the means of production (in mid-19th Century Europe, the bourgeoisie) would maintain control of society. Meanwhile, the mid-19th Century working class (the proletariat) toiled under domination until that foreordained but hard-to-predict moment when members awoke to consciousness of their situation. That would herald the sparking of a social revolution. Ultimately, this revolution would end in the creation of a communist utopia with the goals of the society placed before the aims of the individual. Such was the theory, anyway. Although there have been several dozen putatively communist regimes, not to mention a sincere 74-year effort in the former Soviet Union, Marxian believers insist there has never been a true communist state. Every attempt that fails is explained as not truly reflecting the theoretical framework of Karl Marx. Having thus far failed to materialize in the world of society and events as Marx predicted the Marxist perspective instead provides many academics with a critically-edged method with which to study culture (Tyson 2015).

Antonio Gramsci, (1891-1937), was born eight years after Karl Marx's death. Gramsci was an Italian radical, a believer in Marx's doctrines who wanted to update them to reflect his

own experiences and insights spent fighting against the rising revolutionary tide of fascism in his home country. Gramsci would eventually be murdered in prison by the authorities. He wrote prison notebooks and his work, broadened the Marxian conversation from a singular focus on class struggle to one focused on power in general. Gramsci thought carefully and systematically about authority, repression, and means of resistance. His most significant contribution to the theoretical perspective came in his theory on hegemony. “Hegemony” is a term with resonance in the field of International Relations, where a ‘hegemon’ is a nation that dominates a region through its power. With Gramsci, the concept of domination through power was extended into society itself. In “Hegemony, Intellectuals, and the State” Gramsci explains the concept of hegemony, specifically regarding political power. Not abandoning, but instead widening Marx’s class analysis system, he writes that “A class is dominant in two ways, i.e., 'leading' and ‘dominant’. It leads the classes which are its allies, and dominates those which are its enemies” (Gramsci 1971, 57). Scholars have since taken the political and theoretical writing of Gramsci and applied them to cultural studies. For example, Gramsci’s theory can be taken as saying the dominant force (in our discussion, the Academy Awards) continuously seeks to maintain its dominance by reinforcing the classes that follow, and consuming subordinate cultures that challenge its dominance. This creates the dominant forces its own version of those cultures, which many unobservant people assume to be the ‘natural’ state of affairs. Gramsci is especially attractive to academics because he provides them an option that does not require abandoning their lifestyle for dangerous revolutionary action – although he certainly did not shy from such commitment himself. Gramsci offers the possibility of subverting the authorities subtly, slowly, over time, all the while living a life that is in its external respects entirely bourgeois. For example, a radical professor can still maintain his/her home, car, job, and accoutrements – even

in the employ of the state they presumably seek to subvert. This partially accounts for Gramsci's enthusiastic academic following.

Drawing on Gramscian hegemony, Welsh Marxist Raymond Williams, a founding member of what is now known as cultural materialism, introduces the idea of a cultural process in the discussion of forces in society. In a famous chapter of his book *Marxism and Literature*, entitled "Dominant, Residual, and Emergent," Williams suggests that rather than being a force of absolute and unchangeable control, there is a process that is forever ongoing in which the dominant culture, while attempting to maintain itself, is threatened by not only residual cultures, but also by emergent cultures in society. Residual cultures would be those which may have once been dominant but are now on the decline, while emergent cultures refer to those picking up steam and which aim to become dominant, or popular. Williams writes that "the residual, by definition, has been effectively formed in the past, but it is still active in the cultural process, not only and often not at all as an element of the past; but as an effective element of the present" and that by emergent cultures he means "that new meanings and practices, new relationships and kinds of relationship are continually being created" (Williams 1977). In understanding and employing the three theoreticians and their contributions to Marxist Criticism as I do in this thesis, one can begin to construct an explanation for the Academy's nominations that more intellectually interprets the pattern found at the Oscars today.

I refer to the Academy Awards as the dominant cultural force within the film industry because of the power the sponsoring Academy holds over both the industry and the public. Levy, in the chapters "The Oscars' Huge Impact" and "Oscaritis – The Oscars' Negative Effects" writes how nominations and wins can influence a film and its contributors respectively. He writes about how an Oscar nomination holds power over a film in that it can turn a box-office

dud into a hit. An example he provides is “John Ford’s *The Informer* (1935), which opened to good reviews but was not popular at the box office. However, after winning four Oscars, the largest number of awards for any film in 1935, including Director and Actor, the film became a hit” (Levy 2003, 298). He goes on to write that in 1947 *The Best Years of Our Lives* turned out to be the most commercial Oscar-winner of its time, earning more than \$11 million in domestic rentals, and, after winning eight Oscars saw a \$2 million increase at the box office. As for the Oscars’ effect on the contributors, he writes that after winning an Oscar, actors many times are approached to participate in some B-Grade films hoping audiences will watch, regardless of their merits. However, sometimes the actors that agree to partake in these films never make it back to critical success, like Susan Hayward after winning the Oscar for *I Want to Live!* (1958) in 1959. A secondary effect the Oscar can have on actors is the role of typecasting. After playing a role so well that an actor is able to achieve the ultimate success, they may begin to receive endless amounts of offers to play similar roles, occasionally, even audiences find it difficult to imagine the actor in any other role. The Oscar can also influence the opinion the public holds about films. For example, in 1995 with the release of *The Usual Suspects*, the public had little interest in a film about the events that followed the meeting of five random career criminals in a routine police lineup. The film had only the 75th highest gross that year (not very good), and only the 151st largest opening weekend in 1995 (even worse) (Box Office Mojo 2017). However, after the film scored big amongst critics and winning both of its Oscar nominations, for Best Actor and Best Screenplay, the film has since gone down in history as one of the best films of all time, ranked #26 on IMDb’s top rated movies by IMDb users (“Top Rated Movies” 2017).

The power of the Academy Awards is one that is found in its cultural influence. Having the ability to effect the decisions of the public, the careers of winners and nominees, and the

legacy of what could have been overlooked films are just a few examples. Evidence of the influence can also be found in television advertisements for films that have received nominations. Phrases like “a record-tying 14 Academy Award nominations” are featured to remind the public that the Academy, comprised of persons literate in the language of film, have nominated a particular film with multiple awards in outstanding achievement because advertisers and producers alike know that an Academy Award nomination carries with it cultural weight. They know that by having that information sit at the top of peoples’ minds that they can potential get people flocking to the theater to watch their films. But, like any dominant force in society, the Academy Awards has to deal with emergent classes and cultures that are trying to shift their way to the top.

The first emergent cultural force that will be discussed is the many other film award ceremonies that are held each year, which unlike the Oscars are presented more as popular culture events than as elite film ceremonies. This is where we see the creation of award ceremonies like the MTV Movie Awards which started in 1992 and the Kids Choice Awards which started in 1988, that are aimed at the entertainment of the general public rather than a small group of film enthusiasts. These ceremonies tend to celebrate films that have earned large sums of money at the box office, films the general public has gotten to see or at a minimum heard about, rather than artistic limited release films. One way to tell that the public is interested in these films is by looking at the way the winners are chosen. At the MTV Movie Awards, for example, winners are voted on by the public via the award show’s website. Popular culture ceremonies also use comedy, not only to entertain the audience the way elite ceremonies use humor but also to counteract the separation between winners and the rest of the general public. At the Kids Choice Awards, movie stars, popular directors, and participants in popular culture

films get green gooey slime thrown on them as they win their awards. The ceremony's sliming is its attempt to wash away the participant's stardom, and present him/her as any other ordinary person. In doing so, popular culture ceremonies make a mockery of the original elite ceremonies, like the Oscars; poking fun at their formality, elitism, and exclusivity. Lastly, these ceremonies offer the general public tickets for purchase to attend the ceremony, not limiting it to an elite group within the industry. Of course, in some sense, the formality of the Oscar ceremony itself is a sort of self-conscious imitation of other honorific events from earlier times, so there may be yet another way to connect Williams' theory of residual cultures to the Academy Awards.

One of the ways in which the Academy responds to the other ceremonies is by framing the Oscars as just another popular culture ceremony. Televising the ceremony and using the red carpet entrance are two ways the ceremony incorporates the public, in order to take the ceremony from elite to popular. Televising the Oscars allows for the public to engage with the ceremony without actually having to open the doors up to the general public. Viewers can sit back as they listen to the host tell jokes, and watch as incredible performances by popular artists take place on the stage just a few feet from them on the small screen. The red carpet has adapted to allow television networks like ABC and E! to broadcast live interviews with attendees before they walk into the auditorium. The interviews capture the public's interest, as they listen to their favorite actors and actresses tell stories, make aware their excitement, and inform the viewers on their biased opinions of whom they want to win Best Picture.

However, the unpopularity of the films can also be a way of attracting attention to the ceremony, and maintaining its influence. The actual popular culture ceremonies, like the MTV Movie Awards, focus their attention on films that have earned major popular acclaim as a way to attract viewers. If the Academy chose to nominate popular films, then it would truly become just

another popular culture ceremony, putting itself in an even more dangerous position to be dethroned as the dominant ceremony. In nominating films most viewers have not watched, it provides the public with a sense of uncertainty and surprise that captivates them and keeps them coming back for more. This is why we see bumps in viewership of Oscar-nominated films post-Oscar Sunday. The nomination of unpopular films also helps to maintain the image of an elite ceremony discussed in Chapter One. It aims to strengthen their image of the authority figure on film. The theater, as it was discussed in Chapter Two, is a place for the masses, and as such features films that are meant to attract viewers in large quantities. And so, the Oscars having one of its qualifications for nomination being films that have been theatrically released responds by limiting nominations to the less popular films, films that struggle to even make it to the box office. Take *Moonlight*, which was initially released in October 2016 to limited release in only four theaters across the United States, only ever made it to 1,564 theaters by November 2016, making it only \$27 million domestically, and not even making an international debut (Box Office Mojo 2017). Compare that to the massively popular recent release of the live-action version of *Beauty and the Beast* (2017) that after only 17 days in 4,210 theaters (US) has made over \$393 million dollars domestically and over \$874 million worldwide (Box Office Mojo 2017). A film like *Beauty and the Beast*, however, would at best only score an Oscar nomination for Best Costume Design or perhaps one for Best Song or Score, as a way to have a little name recognition at the ceremony. But, a film that has gained so much popularity within just a few days threatens the Academy's ability to be the arbiters of cinema, and so, is unlikely ever to be nominated for any of the Big Five. This is what stands at the center of *Moonlight*'s Best Picture win over *La La Land*. While *La La Land* (2016) never reached the popularity of a film like *Beauty and the Beast* (2017) it did, however, do better than is what is expected for the

leading contender going into Oscar Sunday. The film in its widest release was available in 3,236 theaters and made over \$150 million domestically (Box Office Mojo 2017). The Academy, feeling the pressure of the public's influence, was forced to reassert its power by presenting *Moonlight* with the Oscar. It is not the first time this has happened either. Looking back at the 2016 ceremony, there was an expectation that the partly studio, partly indie produced blockbuster *The Revenant* (2015) was going to take home the night's most prized position after winning the Golden Globe for Best Motion Picture (Drama), The BAFTA for Best Film, and performing well at the box office, bringing in over \$180 million. Not to mention, that the film's director, Alejandro González Iñárritu, had led his previous film, *Birdman: The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance* (2014) to the Oscar for Best Picture in 2015. However, the Academy decided to go the unpopular route then too, giving the Oscar to the strong indie contender *Spotlight* (2015). So, to rehash, the way that the Academy deals with emergent ceremonies is by tailoring the Oscars as a popular culture ceremony and by nominating films that tend to be unpopular. But, the films cannot just be unpopular; they also have to be made with small budgets.

The majority of films nominated for Oscars are generally stuck with production budgets of less than \$50 million. While this may seem like an extraordinary amount of money to the average American, when it comes to producing a film, \$50 million is less than maximal. From those \$50 million the effort must cover the cost of cast wages, crew wages, production design, live set and studio costs, costumes, catering, accommodation, transportation, travel, hotel stay, and depending on the film, story rights have to be bought. In short, Hollywood is big business, and the scale of economy is gargantuan. The Academy is attracted to films with small budget,

not only because it provides an added challenge for filmmakers to handle, but also because it eases their anxieties of being bought.

Blockbusters, studios and big budget films act in combination as the second influence the Academy, as the dominant cultural force, needs to curtail. Studios have incredible amounts of money they are prepared to throw a film's way if they believe it will make them more money. In doing so, big budget blockbusters are capable of hiring the best casts and crews in the business, many of which have already won Oscars. Generally speaking, the more money a film has, the better the talent it is capable of affording. A few blockbusters from 2016 include *The Huntsman: Winter's War* with a budget of \$115 million, *Kung Fu Panda 3* with a budget of \$145 million, *Captain America: Civil War* and *Batman vs. Superman: Dawn of Justice* both with funds of \$250 million (Box Office Mojo 2017). All of the blockbusters named feature actors that have won at least one Oscar, however, none of which received their Oscar for the blockbuster mentioned. One cannot simplify the explanation for low-budget films winning Oscars to the lack of talent within blockbusters because that obviously is not the case. It is more accurate to link the Academy's favoritism of low budget films (or its distaste for blockbusters) to its need to maintain its cultural dominance. Studios having the money to pay for the best talent in Hollywood have the ability to easily buy their way to Oscar gold. So, members find it necessary to limit its nominations to films that are made with small budgets in an attempt to reduce the influence that is placed on them by studio money. They prefer films that have not yet been tainted by capital. Limiting the nominations to low-budget films eliminates the possibility of the public perceiving the ceremony as being one that can be bought by large studios. It expands the criteria for nomination from simply being able to raise capital, and places the power of nomination back in the hands of the Academy.

The indie production community today has consciously positioned itself as the Academy's scapegoat. They are by far the most common type of film at the Academy Awards ceremony, and it has its attractive unpopularity and its budgetary restraints to thank. Indie films fulfill the two golden rules of the Academy: they are usually confined to small budgets because of the financial limitations of the independent companies producing them, and they almost never gain popular acclaim because they tend to deal with subject matters the general public is less inclined to watch. Within the last five years, 31 of the 43 films that have been nominated for Best Picture were produced entirely by independent companies, and another 4 were partially produced by indie companies (which are referred to in the charts below as Semi-Indie films). Only 8 of the 43 films that were nominated were studio productions. Four of the past five Best Picture wins have gone to indie films: *12 Years a Slave* (2013), *Birdman* (2014), *Spotlight* (2015), and *Moonlight* (2016). The exception, *Argo* (2012), nonetheless, still had to conform to the rules of the game; it was made with only \$44.5 million, and never really blossomed into a popular film at the box office with a total domestic gross of \$136 million (Box Office Mojo 2017). The rules the Academy has established in practice over the years are simple, but they are made in order to keep the Academy Awards in a hegemonic position. The indie just happens to be the gem that is perfectly packaged to fit the needs of the Academy. Together, the rules and indies, create a category of films that the Academy can depend on and classify as "artistic," a classification that in itself separates the selected films as being elite, no doubt to maintain the Academy's image.

2013 Academy Award Best Picture Lineup

Title	Budget	Indie or Studio Production	Winner or Nominee
Amour	\$8.9 Million	Indie	Nominee
Argo	\$44.5 Million	Studio	Winner
Beasts of the Southern Wild	\$1.8 Million	Indie	Nominee
Django Unchained	\$100 Million	Indie	Nominee
Les Misérables	\$61 Million	Studio	Nominee
Life of Pi	\$120 Million	Studio	Nominee
Lincoln	\$65 Million	Semi-Indie	Nominee
Silver Linings Playbook	\$21 Million	Indie	Nominee
Zero Dark Thirty	\$40 Million	Semi-Indie	Nominee

2014 Academy Award Best Picture Lineup

Title	Budget	Indie or Studio Production	Winner or Nominee
12 Years a Slave	\$20 Million	Indie	Winner
American Hustle	\$40 Million	Semi-Indie	Nominee
Captain Philips	\$55 Million	Indie	Nominee
Dallas Buyers Club	\$5 Million	Indie	Nominee
Gravity	\$100 Million	Studio	Nominee
Her	\$23 Million	Indie	Nominee
Nebraska	\$12 Million	Indie	Nominee
Philomena	\$12 Million	Indie	Nominee
The Wolf of Wall Street	\$100 Million	Indie	Nominee

2015 Academy Award Best Picture Lineup

Title	Budget	Indie or Studio Productions	Winner or Nominee
American Sniper	\$8.8 Million	Studio	Nominee
Birdman (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)	\$18 Million	Indie	Winner
Boyhood	\$4 Million	Indie	Nominee
The Grand Budapest Hotel	\$25 Million	Indie	Nominee
The Imitation Game	\$15 Million	Indie	Nominee
Selma	\$20 Million	Indie	Nominee
The Theory of Everything	\$15 Million	Indie	Nominee
Whiplash	\$3.3 Million	Indie	Nominee

2016 Academy Award Best Picture Lineup

Title	Budget	Indie or Studio Production	Winner or Nominee
The Big Short	\$28 Million	Indie	Nominee
Bridge of Spies	\$40 Million	Semi-Indie	Nominee
Brooklyn	\$11 Million	Indie	Nominee
Mad Max – Fury Road	\$150 Million	Studio	Nominee
The Martian	\$108 Million	Studio	Nominee
The Revenant	\$135 Million	Studio	Nominee
Room	\$13 Million	Indie	Nominee
Spotlight	\$20 Million	Indie	Winner

2017 Academy Award Best Picture Lineup

Title	Budget	Indie or Studio Production	Winner or Nominee
Arrival	\$47 Million	Indie	Nominee
Fences	\$24 Million	Indie	Nominee
Hacksaw Ridge	\$40 Million	Indie	Nominee
Hell or High Water	\$12 Million	Indie	Nominee
Hidden Figures	\$25 Million	Indie	Nominee
La La Land	\$30 Million	Indie	Nominee
Lion	\$12 Million	Indie	Nominee
Manchester by the Sea	\$8.5 Million	Indie	Nominee
Moonlight	\$1 Million	Indie	Winner

* Nominee data retrieved from Oscars.org

* Production company data retrieved from IMDb.com

* Budgetary data retrieved from BoxOfficeMojo.com (an IMDb company)

Conclusion

In discussions of hegemony, there is often an argument made that the elite cannot possibly make up the dominant cultural forces in society because they lack numbers. However, in terms of the Academy Awards, this argument does not hold up. By examining the folklore present at the Academy Awards, one can identify that the ceremony as an elite ceremony perpetuating its image through the use of rituals and traditional practices. The ceremony requires an invitation to attend, closing its doors to the public. While it is true that the public is able to engage with the ceremony from home as networks televise the show across the country, the real intent behind the broadcast is simply to appear as popular. The academy feeling the pressure of the popular culture ceremonies adapts itself to respond to the incursion of its power and influence.

The cinema, which the Academy Awards is supposed to represent, on the other hand, is, in fact, a truly popular culture outing. Noticeable in the casual garb of attendees, the open door invitation and the uniting of viewers, the cinema acts as an agent of inclusivity, a place for all to enjoy. One would expect that the films nominated and winning Oscars would be the movies that Americans have watched at the cinema over the last 12 months, but this is rarely the case. The Academy, rather than nominate popular films that the cinema depends on to stay alive, has continually nominated films that few Americans have seen. The practice of nominating independent films can be traced all the way back to the 1940s and 50s, but it was not until the 1990s that the practice was cemented, not coincidentally the same period in which popular culture film ceremonies like the MTV Movie Awards started picking up steam.

The Academy Awards is a ceremony that is broadcast around the globe for millions to watch, but its effects on films, the industry, and Americans are unique and long lasting. There is

no doubt that the ceremony will continue to operate for many years to come; however, it is important that both scholars and Americans begin to look more closely at the way the Academy Awards nominates its candidates and chooses its winners. While there is still merit behind the campaign explanation, there is no denying that big budget blockbusters face much greater challenges on the road to the Oscars than their indie counterparts. What I hope the reader takes from this thesis is not that the Academy Awards ceremony is in anyway rigged, but that perhaps Americans' interest or disinterest in certain films has a larger impact on the final results than they may have once thought. Being the dominant cultural critic of films in the United States, it is time for more than a handful of scholars to start discussing how the ceremony affects Americans and how Americans affect the ceremony.

One area for future research on the discussion of Academy nominations and awards could be the less sought after categories like the Sound category (Best Sound Editing and Best Sound Mixing), the Music category (Best Original Song and Best Original Score), and the Design category (Best Costume Design, Best Makeup & Hairstyling, and Best Production Design). This thesis dealt with the most prestigious of Oscars, The Big Five, and its conclusions could be different from the other categories. While The Big Five are reserved almost exclusively for indie films that comply with the informal rules the Academy has established, I suspect the less sought after categories are reserved for larger blockbuster films that provide the ceremony an opportunity to bestow upon viewers of the general public a sense of name recognition when watching the Oscars. Titles such as *Skyfall*, *The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug*, *Lone Survivor*, *Gravity*, *Interstellar*, *The Hobbit: Battle of the Five Armies*, *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, *Mad Max: Fury Road*, *The Martian*, *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*, *The Jungle Book*, and *Arrival* are just a few of the blockbusters that made up the Sound Editing and Sound Mixing

nominations over last five years. These categories seem to be littered with the names of big blockbuster hits, but future research could investigate whether the budgets and successes of said films have had any effect on the final results of the races. In other words, do popular films actually win Oscars in the more obscure categories, or is their inclusion just a show to gain a little public interest?

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